

PREFACE

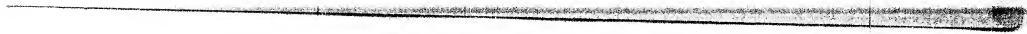
from which many persons of twoscore years might shrink. At the ripe age of almost eight decades Mrs. Clay-Clopton entered into the work with a heart as light as a girl's and a sustained energy and enthusiasm that have been as remarkable as they are unparalleled. While preparing these pages I enjoyed a daily intercourse with her extending over eight months, during which time I often found myself spellbound by the descriptive powers which nearly a half century ago compelled the admiration of leading men and women of that day.

"My wife was amazed at your eloquence," wrote Attorney-General Jeremiah Black in 1866, and in succeeding letters urged Mrs. Clay to put her experiences with Messrs. Johnson, Holt and Stanton into book form. To these and urgings as powerful from many quarters, reiterated during the past forty years, until the present work was undertaken, Mrs. Clay-Clopton has remained indifferent. Her recollections of a long life are now gathered in response to a wide and insistently expressed desire to see them preserved in a concrete form ere the crowding years shall have made impossible the valuable testimony she is able to bear to ante-bellum and bellum conditions in her dearly loved South land. To that end many friends of Mrs. Clay-Clopton have lent an eager aid, and it is an acknowledgment due to them that their names be linked here with the work they have so lovingly fostered.

The inception of the work as now presented is primarily due to Mrs. Milton Humes, of Abingdon Place, Huntsville, Alabama, a daughter of the late Governor Chapman, of that State, and the friend from her childhood of Mrs. Clay-Clopton. For many years Mrs. Humes has ardently urged upon our heroine the necessity for preserving her rich memories as a legacy, not alone to the South, but to all lovers of the romantic and eventful in our national



MRS. CLAY
of Alabama



A BELLE OF THE FIFTIES

A Belle of the Fifties

Memoirs of Mrs. Clay, of Alabama,
covering Social and Political Life in
Washington and the South, 1853-66
Put into narrative form by Ada Sterling

Illustrated from contemporary portraits



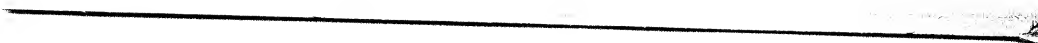
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To

THE DEAR MEMORY OF THE HUSBAND OF MY YOUTH
CLEMENT CLAIBORNE CLAY

VIRGINIA CLAY-CLOPTON

PREFACE

THE memoirs of "Mrs. Clay, of Alabama," by which title Mrs. Clement C. Clay, Jr. (now Mrs. Clay-Clopton), was known during the period comprised by 1850-87, begin in the middle of the second decade of the nineteenth century, the scenes being laid among the affluent plantations of North Carolina and Alabama, and, continuing through two brilliant administrations at the national capital, close, as she emerges from the distresses which overtook her and her husband after the never-to-be-forgotten tragedy that plunged a nation into mourning—the death of Mr. Lincoln.

In the researches made in order to obviate all possible inaccuracies in these memoirs (a precaution always necessary where one's life has been long and experiences so varied), I have come upon no record of any other woman of her time who has filled so powerful a place politically, whose belleship has been so long sustained, or whose magnetism and compelling fascinations have swayed others so universally as have those of Mrs. Clay-Clopton. In the unrestful days at the capital which preceded the Civil War her winning personality was such as to cause even those whom she esteemed the enemies of her section, in those days when "sections" were, to be covetous of her smiles. At no period of her long career have her unique courage, her beautiful optimism, her inspiring buoyancy been more accentuated than during the making of the present book. The recalling of incident after incident, step by step, of so great a procession of memories as are here set down is a task